

## Using Wiki for making a collaborative teacher-students' site

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**Key words:** wikis, collaborative storeroom, hypertext tasks, teacher's site.

**Abstract:** This paper suggests some practical ways to organize a collaborative online environment for a teacher and students based on wikis that would satisfy their expectations of a good teacher's site. It introduces the ideas of a collaborative storeroom and a resource for developing hypertext tasks.

### Introduction

“Forming and developing the competence of using information-communication technologies” is one of the requirements to the study skills (in the Russian text called “metadiscipline outcomes”) that a student is supposed to acquire on completion of the secondary educational programme as it is stated by the Federal State Educational Standard [the Federal State Educational Standard, p.7]. Thus, the use of ICT in the learning and teaching process is encouraged and insisted on.

The same strategy has been followed by Western educational systems in recent decades. Such authors as S. Wheeler, A. Ebersbach, M. Glaser, R. Heigl, D. H. Jonassen, K. L. Peck, B. G. Wilson highlight the increasing importance of “interactive environments in which technology is used to support and enhance collaborative learning processes” [Wheeler S., p.1]. Numerous collaborative resources such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds have been created by teachers all over the world.

In Russia teachers are also recommended and sometimes required to develop teaching sites and pages though this tendency being a prescription of the authority has lost its original incentive and has become a mere formality for teachers. As a result, such sites may become static informative resources lacking real educational value.

But what is an effective teacher's site like? Being asked this question most teachers immediately say "informative" and "educative". Students' view of a teacher's site doesn't differ a lot. According to an opinion poll held among two age groups of students: 11-14 and 15-18, they have slightly different expectations of a good teacher's site which are determined by the age. Students from the first age group want it to be interesting, bright, beautiful, educational, and it is supposed to contain riddles, crosswords, educational games, information and interesting tasks, rules and tests to practise. The second group focus more on information, sample tests and educational tasks, useful links, home tasks, photos and videos. They expect such a site to be stylish, creative, informative, structured, user-friendly, up-to-date. It is obvious from their answers that nobody considers the collaborative value of a teacher's site. Being active Web 2.0 users in life (practically 100% of older students have accounts on social networks) Russian school students do not connect the idea of interaction and authoring with a teacher's site.

This paper focuses on the ways of creating a collaborative environment for learning foreign languages based on wikis and presents some practical ideas of how online cooperation can be organized by a teacher so that it meets the students' expectations of a good teacher's site and develops their digital literacies.

### **Why wikis?**

Wikis are "fully editable websites" [Augar N., p.2], "a major component of Web 2.0" [Parker K.R., p.1], and "a collaborative tool that allows many people to create and edit online documents or web pages without specialist programming knowledge" [McIntyre S., p.2]. Wikis enable students to collaboratively generate, mix, edit and synthesise subject-specific knowledge within a shared and openly accessible digital space [Wheeler S., p.3]. A teacher performs the role of a facilitator and a resource rather than evaluator providing space for students' online cooperation. Besides, "there is evidence that user-created content software in particular encourages deeper engagement with learning through the act of authoring, simply because the awareness of an audience, no matter how virtual or

tentative, encourages more thoughtful construction of writing” (Jacobs, 2003) [Wheeler S., p1].

At present the World Wide Web is full of wikis with different interfaces and features. The easiest ones to use are those that offer WYSIWYG (‘what you see is what you get’) type of editor – any changes in the content are displayed immediately on the screen, no special knowledge of wiki syntax is needed. A teacher familiar with working in any text editor (Microsoft Office, Open Office, etc.) can easily create and develop such a wiki. The following examples of wikis have WYSIWYG editor: [www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com), [www.wiki.zoho.com](http://www.wiki.zoho.com). The former allows a teacher to create a free classroom wiki with unlimited functions or a standard wiki-page or a wiki-site which have a limited free access to their functions and features. The latter lets a user create one free wiki without limiting the functions.

“Many different media types can be embedded into a wiki page, such as text, images, video and RSS feeds. The person who sets up a wiki can offer other users password protected access, restricting the number of people able to edit or create content. As each edit is documented, it is possible to see a chronological list of changes to content, and even to revert pages back to previous versions. Many wikis also contain a range of other collaborative tools such as message boards to help facilitate the collaborative process” [McIntyre S., p.2].

## **Practical Ideas**

Having a rich collection of useful online and offline digital resources makes a teacher’s life easier in one way and more difficult in another – where and how can it be organized? If there’s no collection – how can it be started? A wiki can become a convenient way of making one.

## **Collaborative Storeroom**

More often than not a teacher has a need to extend on the materials suggested by a course book when studying certain topics– be it grammar or

vocabulary, culture, everyday life issues, etc. A wiki can be organized as a collection of topic-based pages to which both the teacher and the students can contribute links to interesting resources and games, widgets such as exciting videos from Youtube, Power Point (or other) presentations, embedded tests and quizzes (made on sites like [www.learnclick.com](http://www.learnclick.com), [www.proprofs.com](http://www.proprofs.com), Google forms, and added to the wiki-pages with the help of copying html codes), comments and opinions, demo-versions of upcoming classroom tests.

As a rule, it's the teacher who uploads the first items in the collection and stimulates the students to add whatever interesting and useful they find. Later it becomes habitual for students to share the resources they come across on the wiki-pages.

Another type of links which can be collected on a wiki-site is links to simple digital resources created by students. For example, on a holiday students can exchange e-cards made on [www.cardkarma.com](http://www.cardkarma.com), or they can create simple quizzes or tests for each other on <https://testmoz.com>, and thus communicate and peer-check each other.

Wiki-pages can be used for collaborative writing and storing the written texts. For instance, students are asked to make profiles of some professions which would include a short description of a profession, a list of qualities that a person needs for this profession, what people have to do, a picture of a typical representative of this profession, etc. Students can either write it themselves and compare their ideas and profiles, or make a research and find the required information on the web. They can work on one page all together (in this case the space on the page should be well-organized, otherwise students may accidentally delete each other's findings) or each group of students can be assigned a separate page to present their outcome which would turn into an encyclopedia in the end.

In the same way collaborative vocabulary storage can be organized on a wiki instead of having paper vocabulary books.

Student-generated digital products can also become part of a teacher's wiki-site. As an example, students may be offered to create animated avatars on

[www.voki.com](http://www.voki.com), sound them (either directly on the site or record their voices with the help of Audacity software, which is free, and upload them to the voki site). When a voki is finished, the html code is copied and embedded into a wiki (in the widgets there's an option "other html" which allows to embed any html code) and it's a nice way to have a voki parade. Afterwards a voting can be started for the best voki, which makes it a creative competition.

Another resource easily embedded to a wiki is an e-book made on [www.zooburst.com](http://www.zooburst.com). The process of writing a story and designing an interactive book is time-consuming but extremely involving as each student becomes an Author whose book is published online and anyone can access and read it. A wiki turns into a library.

Project work has been an integral part of learning process for many years by now. Students still make projects in a traditional way, i.e. without using any technology at all – and that shouldn't be eliminated from the classroom whatsoever. At the same time technology can bring more fun into this process: before the public presentation students can be asked to "advertise" their projects on the teacher's wiki-site: they place some information and an illustration of what they're going to present. This can help the teacher to monitor the process of preparing a project and agitate students.

A wiki itself can become a project developed by the students. For example, they may create a wiki virtual guide to their city (school, favourite place, etc.) designing it in the form of a talking book (inserting audio files), an interactive leaflet with presentations and videos, a route (with hyperlinks).

To sum it up, a collaborative storeroom can be a place to collect and share links, information and digital products.

## **Hypertext Tasks**

Another great way in which a wiki can serve to a teacher is being a basis for producing hypertext tasks.

“Hypertext is the presentation of information as linked network of nodes which readers are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion. It allows for multiple authors, a blurring of the author and reader functions, extended works with diffuse boundaries, and multiple reading paths” [Keep C.].

A hypertext task implies a student’s determinative choice at certain stages of its fulfillment which eventually brings to a logical conclusion. At the final stage students may compare the anticipated outcome of their choices with the achieved one.

Hypertext may perform one of the following functions in tasks of this type:

1. Being a means of true or false routing inside the body of the task. Students face a problem which has to be solved and make a logical choice of one of the suggested hyperlinks. The right choice leads to the true information and the correct route of development, the wrong one (a logical mistake) leads to false information and a corrupted route of development. The final outcome shows where the mistakes have been made. An example of such a task can be found here: <http://johndillingerwebquest.wikispaces.com/>.
2. Being an emotional router in a story. Such hypertext tasks are based on plot development where a student makes decisions crucial for the main character’s destiny, further adventures, relationships, etc. In these tasks there are no right or wrong choices, students act as co-writers of the story. The final decision may have an open ending – students are asked to write it themselves (a wiki suits perfectly for this purpose).

Developing such tasks is time and effort-consuming, that’s why teachers’ collaboration and sharing could become a great source of inspiration and lay the beginning of a library of hypertext tasks. Any suggestions and findings are welcome at <http://hypertexttaskscollection.wikispaces.com/>.

## **Wikis – to be continued**

Wikis have had a long history since 1994, when Ward Cunningham first introduced his WikiWikiWeb. Celebrating their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary they remain a

popular, easy-to-use and quick way to connect people's ideas together. There are many more approaches to using wikis in education than discussed in this paper, one just has to start trying and using them.

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